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1668: The Year of the Animal in France

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Author
Amussen, Susan D

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1668: The Year of the Animal in France. Peter Sahlins.
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Susan D. Amussen
University of California, Merced

The arresting title for this fascinating book is slightly misleading—it focuses not just on 1668, but the period from 1661 to 1674. In it, Peter Sahlins argues that the development of absolutism early in the reign of Louis XIV was accompanied by a dramatic change in attitudes to animals. That transition, from "humanimalism," the Renaissance approach to animals as moral exemplars for humans, to a Cartesian mechanistic approach to them, is visible in literature, art history, medicine and science. The book engages with each of these, showing how they were connected to, or used by, the court as Louis solidified his grip on power and developed the symbolic language of the absolutist state. Sahlins argues that 1668 is the fulcrum of this change, though like any major cultural shift, the process is erratic, uneven, and contested.

Sahlins builds the argument over eight chapters in three sections, with an introduction and conclusion. Each chapter is a case study, mostly self-contained but in dialogue with the others. The first section focuses on the Royal Menagerie at Versailles, and the literary representations of it. The menagerie was one of the early areas developed at Versailles, its viewing pavilion was the first building constructed in the gardens, long before the court moved there. The links between display and absolutism were clear: "the absolute monarch constructed his rule symbolically with the graceful and peaceable display of birds in a panoptical viewing palace" (67). The peaceable display, given the number of animals (mostly birds, immobilized in cages or with clipped wings) in a small area, may have been more optimism than reality, but the literary representations of it all focus on this. The second section focuses on the visual afterlives of the animals—their representation in tapestries, as well as in anatomy and natural history and physiognomy. Charles Le Brun's series of tapestries, "The Months, or The Royal Houses" place animals from the menagerie in the border, at eye level; they are natural rather than allegorical. The real animals served to affirm the reality of the royal palaces portrayed in the series. At the same time, the first project of the new Royal Academy of Sciences, established in 1666, was a book of natural history on an extreme scale—a volume 58cm high. The animals depicted were from the menagerie; the engravings showed both the animal as it would look alive, and then some part of a dissection—whether inner organs or a skeleton. The ~~final~~ **[alt: last]** chapter in this section examines Charles Le Brun's drawings of animal faces, images which looked back to a Renaissance tradition of seeing links between humans and animals, and forward to a Cartesian use of geometry to define the relationship of facial parts.

The final section moves more explicitly to the impact of Cartesian ideas—with chapters on a series of xenotransfusion experiments undertaken between 1667 and 1669; the representation of various chameleons on the borders between science and literature; and the ~~use~~ of animals in the fountains of the Versailles labyrinth. Each of these chapters demonstrates a push and pull between older models of science and knowledge and newer ones. The question of the relation between humans and animals was key: were they more similar or different? Picking up on the tension demonstrated in Charles Le Brun's faces, Sahlins shows how this debate was ~~picked up~~ in practical ways, with a chapter on attempts at animal-human blood transfusions, and the different ways scientists and novelists wrote about chameleons, dead and alive. The final chapter examines the sculptures of the Versailles labyrinth, designed in 1674: the peaceable kingdom of the menagerie a decade earlier is replaced by sculptures illustrating mostly violent

fables based on Aesop. By the end of the decade, animals were beasts, separate from humans; ironically, the shift also drew attention to the beastial nature of human nature. This ultimately is the human nature that Louis XIV's absolutism sought to govern.

As this brief summary suggests, this is a wide ranging book, which raises many interesting questions. Like all good cultural history, it shows how developments in superficially different areas are linked. While the chapters could almost stand alone, they connect and build on each other in satisfying ways. In extending our view to animals, Sahlins has drawn attention to the broader intellectual and cultural contexts of absolutism: those contexts gave absolutism its purchase. While this is convincing, questions of causation are obscure. The narrow focus also limits our understanding: if there is a change of this magnitude in a relatively short period of time, the reader wonders if this is really a complete transformation ~~of~~ a shift in emphasis and balance. Furthermore, while he nods to the gendered dynamics of early modern thinking about nature, and notes the relationship between the "Menagerie" of animals and the "ménage" of the household, Sahlins is silent on the ways the animal kingdom intersected with human hierarchies—of social status, gender, and race.

These are quibbles with a remarkable book. Among its virtues, this is a physically satisfying book. It is beautifully produced, with almost 100 black and white illustrations, and sixteen color ones. The paper is heavy. At a time when more and more people encounter books as ephemeral objects on a screen, it is a reminder of the physicality of the book. The book, while sometimes frustrating, is also stimulating, a reminder (should we need one) of the benefits of crossing traditional areas of knowledge. Readers will think differently about everything from tapestries to absolutism: surely an impressive accomplishment.